

## Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Deuteronomy 6:1-9  
Mark 12:28-34

### WHY TWO?

Priorities, first things first – we know what it means to identify the most important pursuit. It is the kind of a defining question we might hear in a presidential debate. It helps us know core values. Which commandment from all of the 613 commandments found in Hebrew law in the Torah is the first of all? Everyone show me your index finger. That's what the question from a learned Hebrew scribe requests from Jesus – one commandment, one answer. Now everyone show me two fingers. That's how many commandments Jesus gives in his response. The question is: why two and why these two, instead of one?

The first part of Jesus' answer about the first commandment would not have been surprising. He quotes a version of what is called 'the Shema' found in Deuteronomy 6, the affirmation of faith and commandment to love God, that many Jewish people recite at least twice a day. "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." What begins as a statement of faith moves into a commandment to love God. The commandment is not to pray to God a certain number of times each day. Although it assumes faith in God, neither is it a commandment regarding belief. This is a commandment to love.

It is a lot to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength. If we thought of God as a cruel tyrant, it would be impossible to respond with love. What we need to believe beyond Jesus as Lord and Savior is something about ourselves - that when it comes to God, we are beloved beyond belief. We don't have to create our love for God out of nothingness - we simply reflect back a portion of the divine love that engulfs every fiber of our being. Realizing, experiencing that deep and broad love of God for each one of us moves us beyond belief to a place where we can begin to reflect what God has bestowed upon us. Love calls forth love.

However, Jesus doesn't stop with just that commandment to love God, but connects it in a way it can never be disconnected to love for others, for neighbor. If each one of us is among God's beloved, so is that other person, be he a Democrat or Republican, a Socialist or an Independent, be she lovely, likeable or not. We are called to love people of all religions or of none; what may be harder is the command to even love those Christians with whom we disagree. The identity of neighbor is not confined only to who lives on our street or who shares our race, language, sexual orientation, nationality, or love for our favorite football team.

In this case, love is more than an emotion. It would not make much sense to command that someone feel a certain way. Our emotions are not totally under our control. We cannot simply decide we will never feel angry or we will always be happy. We can't honestly say that we are going to have an emotional love in our hearts for each and every person – that is not totally within our control. But what is being commanded here is the kind of action that treats the one loved as being of very high value.

The context in which this commandment comes in Leviticus 19 is one where we find the requirement that enough crops be left in the field so that sojourners might find something to glean for themselves. There are also prohibitions of the oppression and exploitation of Israel's weak and poor. Stealing and dealing falsely, mistreating employees or discriminating against the disabled, slander and vengeance are all forbidden here. Loving one's neighbor as oneself may go beyond such things, but it certainly does not fall short of such things.

Loving God, loving neighbor – the scribe reacts positively to Jesus' double answer. "You are right, Teacher,...these are more important than the others." It was quite an admission. He could not deny the spiritual

wisdom he had heard. Later the Gospel of Mark indicates that the scribes were among those who exploited the poor and the marginalized. We don't know to what extent this particular scribe actively promoted the oppressive system which kept those like him near the top of the heap. But we get the sense that he grasps the challenge Jesus has laid out for him.

That does not mean we are required to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. That does mean we are to love our neighbors in the same way that we love ourselves. We are to be tolerant of, to have time for, to be interested in, to give the benefit of the doubt to, to deeply desire the welfare of others, even as we love ourselves in these ways. We are to give of ourselves to our neighbors. When we do not know what it means to love our neighbor, we look to the One who embodied divine love. This one, two - dual first commandment is compelling, not just because Jesus said it, but because he did it.

Alicia and Michael Stillman were concerned when their 19-year-old daughter, Emily, called her from college saying she was quite sick. They directed her to medical attention, but soon thereafter, Emily died of a bacterial meningitis infection. Heartbroken, the family, in its shock, made the decision to donate her organs for possible transplant. The young woman's heart ended up being given to a 34-year old doctor named Guy Mulligan, a father of two, who was in dire need of a transplant. After he had recovered from the operation, Guy, from Aurora, Ohio, agreed to meet the donor's family. He traveled to their home in West Bloomfield, Michigan. The mother, Alicia, described the encounter this way. "He sat down on the couch that Emily would lay on when she would watch TV. He let me lay my head on his chest. I felt her heart beating against my ear. I heard her heart beating strong."<sup>1</sup> Can you imagine it? Boom-boom, boom-boom. One-two, one-two.

At times the church is called the body of Christ. In it still beats the heart of God's child, Jesus Christ. I'm quite confident that God bends down to listen to the heartbeat within us. One-two, one-two – love God, love neighbor; love God, love neighbor. Core values - the heartbeat of Christ that gives us our life itself. Let it beat strong, church. Feel it pump vibrancy throughout our being, as it reaches out to God and to all of God's beloved. One-two - do it with me: one-two, one-two; love God, love neighbor; love God, love neighbor – the heartbeat of Christ within us. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nbcnews.com/health/i-could-feel-his-heart-organ-donor-families-bond-recipients-2D11648771>